

“May the
Force Be
With You”

Background

Spherion Corporation is one of North America’s leading staffing and recruiting companies with annual revenues of \$2 billion. On any given day, 300,000 Spherion employees are on assignment for many of the Fortune 1000 companies in a wide variety of industries. Despite its prominence in the staffing industry, Spherion faces stiff competition in its marketplace from other staffing firms including Kelly Services and Manpower, among others.

By 2005, while Spherion had enjoyed its fair share of coverage in the media over the years, the company’s public relations executives were becoming increasingly aware of the need to expand its reach in the press and use this additional coverage to raise its brand and visibility in the marketplace. This was particularly crucial in light of the fact that a new senior executive team had recently been put in place, headed by newly appointed CEO Roy Krause.

As its long-time agency of record, KPR was asked to partner with Spherion Corporation to develop and implement an updated media relations campaign that would be centered around the introduction of a new monthly employment survey to be conducted on Spherion’s behalf by the prominent market research firm, Harris Interactive.

The monthly survey, to be called the Spherion Employment Report, would capture the degree of employee confidence in a number of job-related issues such as confidence in the state of the economy, confidence in their current employers, confidence in their job security, confidence in their ability to find a new job, and more. These employee views would then be quantified in a number of easy-to-disseminate indices led by the benchmark Spherion Employee Confidence Index.

The Employment Report would become part of Spherion’s existing Emerging Workforce Studies, an ongoing series of research studies designed to provide a comprehensive portrait of changes in the American workforce in the context of ongoing social and economic events.



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Objectives

Our initial strategic discussions with Spherion's Director of Public Relations, Kip Havel, focused on how we were going to differentiate the Spherion report from some of the other surveys that were already being offered to the press by a handful of Spherion's competitors. While unique in several ways, the Spherion Report would certainly not be the first employment survey reporters had ever seen. In addition, we were interested in not simply relying on coverage from reporters who cover the workplace beat. Rather, we were intent on raising the level of coverage to include the reporters who cover the economics and labor beats as well. The latter would pose another challenge in that these reporters typically rely on comments from economists. Finally, Spherion was interested in using its new survey to promote not only the company on the national level, but in several of the largest regions of the country where Spherion wanted to expand its business reach.

Strategy and Tactics

We reached the crucial strategic decision to issue the Spherion Employment Report to the media on the very same day that the Bureau of Labor Statistics releases its monthly Employment Situation Report. The BLS report announces the total number of jobs created or lost in the previous month and the increase or decline in the national unemployment rate. The report is considered a critical economic indicator and is widely anticipated and reported by the media.

Tying Spherion's numbers to the BLS report would have the crucial effects we were seeking in our strategy. First, our report would be the first of its kind to be released on the very same day the BLS numbers were issued, thus differentiating us from other employment surveys. Second, we would then be able to reach another level of reporters (economic/labor) because these were the reporters that historically covered the monthly employment numbers. Since the survey would be conducted on a monthly basis (unlike most of the other surveys out there, according to our research) we would have at our disposal a treasure trove of historical data that would prove to be invaluable to the press in the long run.

Execution

In anticipation of our first Spherion Employment Report, we felt it was very important to first alert key members of the media who covered the BLS report on a regular basis that the Spherion survey was about to be launched. We knew we had a winner when just after a few rounds of phone calls, all the reporters we contacted said they wanted to receive the report.

Once the program began, we issued a monthly news release on the first Friday morning of the month immediately after the BLS released its numbers on the previous month's employment situation. Since we wanted to make sure that our survey data would directly tie in to the national employment numbers, we often would need to modify our release slightly to reflect each month's job numbers. In addition, we also issued monthly releases that corresponded with the release of state employment data in six key states—California, New York, Ohio, Illinois, Texas, and Florida.

Results

The publicity generated by our initial monthly survey exceeded our wildest expectations. We expected a somewhat “soft” launch because in general, it takes a period of time for this type of newly introduced survey to generate “traction” with the press. Nonetheless, we were able to set up interviews for CEO Roy Krause with several top economic correspondents and secure placements on the Reuters and Dow Jones news-wires (which were subsequently picked up by hundreds of newspapers around the country). The highlight was a live interview conducted by Bob Moon, the chief economic reporter for National Public Radio, which was heard on hundreds of NPR affiliate stations around the country.

With the release of the state reports we subsequently appeared in such major daily newspapers as the Miami Herald, Dallas Morning News, Newsday, Cleveland Plain Dealer, the San Antonio Express-News, Chicago Tribune and others. All told, our placements in just the first month reached a total circulation of over 7 million and by the third month it had doubled! Our launch was a huge success.

Each month thereafter, the momentum and success for the Spherion Employment Report has grown exponentially. Since its introduction, the Spherion Employment Report has become a key source of information for reporters covering the nation’s employment situation. In fact, reporters often ask for the Spherion numbers in advance of the BLS data. The report has at one time or another appeared in virtually every major publication of influence: the Wall Street Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, USA Today, Chicago Tribune, Newsday, Los Angeles Times, and on and on. Along with Spherion’s Emerging Workforce Study, Spherion’s research initiatives represent the most complete and up-to-date analysis of workforce trends offered by any staffing firm in the U.S. today. As a result, the company has been able to garner widespread and compelling media attention.

In addition, Roy Krause has had numerous appearances on NPR, Bloomberg Radio and TV, AP Radio, CNBC (including Power Lunch and Closing Bell)* and the Nightly Business Report on PBS. In fact, Roy is now a regular each month on Nightly Business Report, providing his unique insights on the nation’s employment situation to a high-level demographic. Roy is the only CEO of a staffing company to have such an arrangement. Attaining this high level of media success and reaching an audience of decision-makers was exactly what we had in mind when we developed the Spherion Employment Report. To date, this initiative has reached virtually hundreds of millions and has created an overwhelming Return on Investment for the company.

Month after month, the media campaign continues its success and Spherion continues to increase its prominence in the national and regional press since the introduction of the Spherion Employment Report. Perhaps most importantly from a strategic viewpoint, this effort has achieved substantial business results for Spherion. After all, publicity for the sake of publicity is meaningless.

Since the program began, the Report, together with data from the Emerging Workforce Study, has been used by Spherion’s sales and marketing staff to open many doors throughout Corporate America. In fact, the increase in publicity and a dramatic rise in Spherion’s brand awareness have led to millions of dollars in sales for the company.

Roy Krause's profile has been heightened significantly which has helped him become the central player in the drive to expand Spherion's growth in the marketplace. Finally, and perhaps not coincidentally, Spherion continues to enjoy quarterly revenue growth and the company stock has recently reached a 52-week high.